

# Grub's up

If agricultural experts have their way, insects could appear on dinner tables in Flanders

Alan Hope

The presence of horsemeat in supermarket food caused less fuss in Flanders than in other places. But would the Flemish consumer be just as willing to eat, say, crickets, grubs or worms? There are those who say they ought to be; however, the prospects for widespread acceptance of insects for human consumption look to be tentative, to put it mildly, for the time being.

Undaunted, the province of Flemish Brabant last month organised a study day on the subject. "We wanted to get a clear picture of how realistic it was to imagine we might have insects on our plate by 2020, how far along the research is and what the possibilities are for business," explains Ine Vervaeke, the province's head of agriculture and horticulture. "We brought together a range of stakeholders – researchers, agricultural interests, the catering industry. As a province, our role is as a facilitator, bringing those different interests together and getting the discussion going." The idea of eating insects – entomophagy – is not a strange

one to a large majority of people in the world. According to some estimates, there are about 1,400 species considered edible by someone somewhere, and they include caterpillars, beetles, ants, bees, termites, butterflies and moths. Some are eaten in their adult state; others as larvae or grubs. They lend themselves to all styles of cooking, including no cooking at all. The taste is generally described as "nutty".

## Insect aversion

"Insects have been eaten by humans since time immemorial; clear evidence of this has been found in fossilised faeces," says Dr Mik Van Der Borgh of the industrial engineering faculty of the University of Leuven. "Right now, about 80% of the world's population eats insects on a regular basis."

But in Europe a distaste for insects developed over time. "That aversion could be overcome by a smart approach and some education," he continues. "A good example is the success of sushi in Europe in recent years. Increased environmental

awareness and attention to animal welfare will play an increasing role in convincing the wider public."

They're already a lot closer in the Netherlands than here: Our northern neighbours have about 20 companies operating in the field as well as a sector association. At present, there is only one business in Flanders

producing insects for human consumption: Ecology Projects in Antwerp. Unfortunately, *Flanders Today* received no response to repeated requests to be interviewed for this article.

Another company, Eirogado in Knesselaere, East Flanders, commissioned a feasibility study last year to examine the viability of switching from egg and chicken production to cultivating insects. However, the results of the study, a spokesperson said, were not positive. "We're not open to the consumption of insects here in Europe," he said. The company has since gone out of business. According to Vervaeke, uncertainty is putting as much of a brake on developments as disgust. "The regulations here in Flanders are perhaps less well-adapted to the possibilities of today," she said. "There's a certain amount of uncertainty over what's allowed and what's not as far as food safety is concerned."

The study day, then, "was an



These chapulín grasshoppers are just one of the 1,400 species of insect enjoyed by people around the world

or pigs – is a useful alternative."

However, European laws on BSE, commonly known as mad cow disease, present a problem.

According to the law, insect meal cannot be fed to agricultural animals because it comes under the heading of processed animal protein. The EU has agreed to introduce some flexibility into its plan as BSE

is now virtually eradicated from the bovine population. In July, a first step will be taken which will allow insect meal to be used in feed in fish

attempt to get a picture of what's happening," she continues. "Now we're looking into how much of a problem there is, and how we might

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do something about it. The first point would be: Are there actually companies that want to start up in this area?"

A more popular avenue of exploration, on the other hand, is the use of insect material in animal feed. "Insects can contribute directly or indirectly to human nutrition," Van Der Borgh says. "An aversion to insects is indeed an obstacle standing in the way of entomophagy. Then the indirect route – adding insect protein to the feed of animals that are already entomophages, like fish, poultry

farms.

But what is the point of pursuing this line of research, given the widespread public distaste? "Insects are able to transform plant material that is not suitable for human consumption into high-value products such as proteins, fats, vitamins and other bioactive materials," responds Van Der Borgh. "Also, particular insects produce virtually no greenhouse gases and require very little water and space. And above all, they're really tasty."



Convincing kids to eat insects: These lollies are available to buy online

## Telenet advises broadcasters to target ads to viewers

TV broadcasters on commercial channels could find a new revenue model via ads targeted at individual customers, to help avoid the problem of viewers who spool through ad breaks, Telenet suggested last week.

The Mechelen-based telecommunications company, which supplies cable and digital TV to a majority of homes in Flanders, was holding talks with commercial broadcasters on an issue that has been the source of some rancour recently.

Broadcasters complain that more and more customers are recording programmes and then making use of the ability to fast-forward through advertisements. For the commercial stations, that means a loss of income, as

advertisers apply downward pressure on ad rates, in the knowledge that their ads are not being seen in a growing number of homes.

Until now the digital TV companies – Telenet and to a lesser extent Belgacom – have argued that VHS allowed viewers to skip ads 20 years ago, and that today's media-savvy viewer is less interested than ever in traditional TV ads.

Last week's meeting was intended to allow Telenet to offer broadcasters an alternative to their current advertising model: instead of broadcasting one ad to all TV sets, implement narrow-casting of "segmented and targeted ads" depending on the profile of the viewer.

"We can see who the client is, and which programmes he is watching,"

said Vincent Bruyneel, Telenet's head of strategy. "In that way we can tell which ads are relevant for him." The technique of targeting ads is familiar to anyone using Google search or (less successfully for now) Facebook, and Telenet stressed that it would be careful to operate within the limits of privacy legislation.

Telenet hopes with its new proposal to head off the threat of legislation that would force digital TV providers to get permission from broadcasters for any function offered by their devices, including the ability to fast-forward through ads. The broadcasters have also suggested bringing two digicorders on to the market – one that cannot skip ads and one that can, the latter of which would cost more. **AH**

